The reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act is an opportunity to return to the law's original intent and update it for today's schools.

Sally McConnell

This issue of Principal asks, “Can public education survive?”

We at NAESP believe the answer is, and must be, a resounding “Yes!” Public education is rightly called the cornerstone of our democracy. It brings together students from diverse backgrounds to gather knowledge, acquire skills for thinking critically and making good choices, and learn about our shared culture while gaining an understanding and appreciation of others. Ultimately, public education is designed to teach young people how to become productive, responsible citizens of our democracy.

This is a tall order, but it’s one that the nation’s public schools have been filling for a couple of centuries. Despite the negative stories about public education in the United States, there is much to celebrate. However, we must not take our system of public education for granted. Maintaining and continually improving it takes ongoing effort and dedication.

We often hear it said that education is a state and local responsibility and a national priority. Unfortunately, too often this priority is not supported by adequate resources. As federal mandates have increased, the funding that could provide real help to schools working to implement these mandates has lagged behind.

Two major laws enacted in the second half of the 20th century are excellent examples of the increasingly prescriptive nature of federal mandates: The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) and the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA). Both of these laws were designed to meet subpopulation needs that some states could not, or would not, address. As they have evolved and undergone periodic reauthorizations or updates, both laws have increased the number and specificity of requirements placed on schools, districts, and states. This article will focus on the ESEA because it is due for reauthorization in the upcoming 110th Congress, and principals are expected to be heavily involved in that process.
Public Education
laudable goals of NCLB and its mandate for shining a light on the progress of student subgroups. However, we believe that the next version of the ESEA should provide some positive changes in the ways schools are expected to move toward closing achievement gaps among their student subpopulations while restoring responsibility for student achievement to the states.

NAESP’s ESEA Task Force, comprised of elementary and middle-level principals from throughout the United States (see box), has been working since December 2005 to assess the impact of the ESEA on students and educators. It has established these general principles related to the reauthorization:

- The appropriate federal role in education should be to promote educational equity and provide resources to assist states, districts, and schools in helping students achieve at the highest levels of their ability;
- The reauthorized ESEA should focus on teaching and learning, and provide guidance for educators working to enhance student achievement;
- The law should reflect an understanding that the main goal of education is the success of every student in learning the curriculum and in developing high-level skills for comprehending information and solving problems;
- The law should authorize sufficient funding for federal mandates and be accompanied by commensurate appropriations; and
- Public funds must be reserved for public schools.

The task force offers specific recommendations in several critical areas.

**Assessment.** It is important to know each student’s level of achievement and to apply appropriate instructional methods to meet their needs. NAESP believes it is important for states to continue to bear this responsibility and that assessment should not depend on the use of standardized test scores alone, but on a system that uses multiple means to measure student progress. It is essential for the federal government to provide the necessary funding.

- Each state must develop an assessment system that identifies high levels of achievement for all students in a fair, challenging, and equitable manner over a reasonable time frame.
- Each assessment system should employ a growth model, demonstrating the progress of individual students and student subpopulations over time.
- Each assessment system should incorporate multiple methods of gauging student progress and achievement.
- The federal government should provide grants to states for promising innovations in assessment.

**School Improvement.** Because schools must deal with changing populations and a continuum of student needs, they should be in a continual process of improvement, reflecting each school’s unique characteristics and goals. Principals, teachers, and other school staff should work as a team to design and implement an improvement plan and promote responsible parent involvement. The federal government and the state have an important role to play in helping schools carry out their plans by providing financial resources, high-quality professional development, and technical assistance.

- States should have the primary responsibility for assessing the quality of their schools and effecting positive change in those that need improvement.
- Each state should create a school accountability system to guide schools and measure their success in making changes needed to increase student achievement.
- Each state should establish a system of rewards for schools that exceed improvement targets and specialized assistance for those that fall short of their targets.
- When student subgroup test scores are used as part of the system for measuring progress in school improvement,
Each state should develop standards for the education of ELL students, including provisions for establishing the point at which they are proficient enough to be tested in English.

Assessment of progress by ELL students must be done in a fair and realistic manner, and should be based on a growth model that measures progress from year to year.

Principal
March/April 2007

Special Education. Students with special needs deserve an education that addresses their unique situations and helps them to achieve at their highest level of ability. The IDEA sets out the federal requirements for educating students with disabilities, and the reauthorized ESEA should include provisions that complement the IDEA with regard to assessing the progress of these students. Information based on a student’s individualized education program (IEP) should be a major assessment component.

Progress toward the achievement of goals specified in student IEPs should be included among the factors used to determine student and school success.

The assessment of the achievement of students with disabilities should be based on a growth model that measures progress from year to year.

Students with disabilities should be tested at the level at which they are taught, even though this may differ from a student’s chronological grade level.

A special education teacher who is fully certified and licensed in special education should be considered to be a highly qualified teacher.

English-Language Learners. When students lack the ability to speak English, they are at an immediate and significant disadvantage. It is important to help these students learn to understand, speak, and write in English simultaneously with their acquisition of knowledge of math, language arts, science, and other content areas of the school curriculum. These efforts must be supported with adequate funds and other resources, accompanied by an understanding of each English-language learner’s (ELL) progress.

Decisions about when and how to test ELL students must be made by the educators who know when these students are ready to be assessed and how that should be accomplished.

School Staffing. It is important for principals and teachers to receive excellent preparation and to keep up-to-date with the latest information and best practices. This requires
high-quality continuing education and technical assistance, backed by research-based professional development. Principals and teachers should participate in professional development as a school team along with other professional staff, and they should be provided with ongoing training unique to their positions.

Criteria for determining the qualifications of principals, teachers, and other education professionals are the responsibility of each state. The federal government must provide resources to assist states in establishing qualification systems and a process to help education professionals reach and maintain their peak performance levels. For states experiencing a shortage of qualified principals and/or teachers, the federal government should provide resources for the development of programs to recruit and retain excellent education professionals.

The reauthorized ESEA should include provisions for and authorize a separate funding stream to help states develop systems of coordinated services designed to ensure that all students are ready and able to learn. The ESEA should provide for resources to assist states in establishing and implementing a system of high-quality early childhood education. The federal government should assist states in providing public schools with full-time counselors, appropriate administrative support, health care professionals, and other student services personnel. The law should include provisions for high-quality after-school programs that offer a variety of activities and academic assistance.

Supplementing Public Education. Each student arrives at school with a unique set of experiences and needs. Many lack even the most rudimentary academic readiness preparation. Some are undernourished or ill, and others may be homeless or subject to parental neglect. All of these factors have a strong effect on a child’s ability to learn and thrive. Therefore, it is important for schools and other state and local agencies to work together to help these students to succeed in school and to lay a strong foundation for success in later life as well. A system of coordinated services, in which health and human services agencies work to support school and students, should be established in every state, funded by state and federal resources.

The reauthorized ESEA should include provisions for and authorize a separate funding stream to help states develop systems of coordinated services designed to ensure that all students are ready and able to learn.

The ESEA should provide for resources to assist states in establishing and implementing a system of high-quality early childhood education.

The federal government should assist states in providing public schools with full-time counselors, appropriate administrative support, health care professionals, and other student services personnel.

The law should include provisions for high-quality after-school programs that offer a variety of activities and academic assistance.

Partnering for Success

Public education must remain a top priority for our nation. The long-term vitality of our public schools depends upon an accountability system that is developed and monitored at the state level. The federal government would best serve our nation by supporting the education of every child through a comprehensive system of state-administered measures designed to gauge the growth of students over time.

The reauthorization of the ESEA provides an opportunity for states, backed by abundant federal resources, to help schools move closer to the goal of ensuring the success of every child. NAESP looks forward to being a strong partner in the reauthorization process.

Sally McConnell is NAESP’s associate executive director for government relations. Her e-mail address is smcconnell@naesp.org.

WEB RESOURCES

NAESP’s Federal Legislative Action Center regularly updates reports on education issues in Congress. http://capwiz.com/naesp/home/

The U.S. Department of Education site includes announcements of changes in the administration of the No Child Left Behind Act. www.ed.gov

Education Week’s Research Center reports on the No Child Left Behind Act and provides links to a number of recent related articles. www.edweek.org/rc/issue/no-child-left-behind/

Healthier Students and Better Test Scores!

SPARK is different from traditional PE programs in many ways:
SPARK is more active and fun, and there is equal focus on health-related fitness and skills, with social skills reinforced throughout the curriculum. SPARK integrates other core subjects with physical education while keeping activity levels moderate for more than half of the class time.

SPARK is the ONLY PE program ever shown to increase standardized test scores! (Research Quarterly, June 1999) Call SPARK today for a free copy of their 1999 “Paper of the Year” and inquire about “SPARKing-Up” YOUR teachers and students.

SPARK is research-based and since 1989 has been providing an all-inclusive approach to coordinated school health with:

- **Curriculum** – Easy to use lesson plans that make activity come alive for children of all abilities
- **On-Site Staff Development** – With unit of credit, certification award, SPARK banner for school, and more
- **Lifetime Follow-Up Support and Consultation** – “SPARK Star” training ensures SPARK lasts!
- **Equipment Sets** – Matched to SPARK content by our specialized education team – discounted for SPARK schools!

SPARK is more than elementary PE. Our menu of research-based programs include Early Childhood, Middle and High School PE, and After School for ages 5-18.

Here’s what Kathleen Kahn, an elementary school principal from Coalinga, CA said about SPARK:

“SPARK is still being used (training occurred more than 4 years ago) and is very popular with teachers. I even see them using some of the management and organizational techniques in the classroom. This was one of the best staff development decisions we have ever made. Thank you.”

Contact SPARK to learn how to improve the health, and test scores of your kids!
1-800 SPARK PE • www.sparkpe.org • spark@sparkpe.org